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Strengths for mastering ageing by realizing tools in Europe: Senior learning model

Dr. Maurice de Greef ^{a,*}, Prof. Dr. Liesbeth de Donder ^b, Prof. Dr. Tinie Kardol ^c,Prof. Dr. Mien Segers ^d, Prof. Dr. Dominique Verté ^e^a*Artéduc, Vughterstraat 20A, 5211 GH 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands*^{b, c, e}*Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium*^d*Maastricht University, Tongersestraat 53, 6211 LM Maastricht, The Netherlands*

Abstract

During the European year of "Active Ageing" the European Commission aims to stimulate increase of social inclusion of older people. According to Nilsson (2010) education can be an effective intervention to increase social inclusion. In order to assess the impact of adult education on social inclusion, a research has been conducted among 995 learners in Europe. Findings indicate that the training design feature 'transfer possibilities' is significantly related to the increase of almost all social inclusion variables and confirms the relevance of the learning environment in order to modify lifelong learning programs and to develop a new Senior Learning Model.

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1. Introduction

According to Eurostat (2010) 17% of the European citizens are considered at-risk of poverty. Likewise Bijl et al. (2011) conclude that social inequality is still a current problem in our current society. In response to these findings, the European Commission (2010) developed a Europe 2020 Strategy in order to lift up 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion. During the European year of "Active Ageing" in 2012 Europe especially stimulates the increase of participation and inclusion of the growing number of European older people in society. According to the Alliance for Health & The Future (2005) the growing number of older people will be up to more than 35% in 2050. These older people risk social exclusion taking their reduced participation and integration, spatial segregation and institutional disengagement into account (Scharf et al. 2001). Research of the Belgian Ageing Studies (BAS) of Verté et al. (2011) shows that lots of older people experience problems in active participation in society, because of mobility-problems, organisational matters regarding activities or problems with the close relatives. These barriers can stimulate social exclusion and prohibit active ageing.

* Corresponding author: Dr. Maurice de Greef. Tel.: +31-617-130-699

E-mail address: info@arteduc.nl

To face the challenges presented by social exclusion, a “transition” is necessary. More concrete a “transition” from the classical view of “vulnerable older people” into older people who are able to participate in daily society. In this context the OECD (Christian, 1974) and Nillson (2010) both indicate that lifelong learning programs can influence an increase of social inclusion. Even more, Kumpalainen (2010) argues that individual growth in citizenship (for example increase of social cohesion) can be supported by joining education.

Still little is known concerning the outcome of adult education in terms of increase of social inclusion. Therefore this article represent results of the series of a study concerning the outcome of lifelong learning programs among vulnerable adults in terms of increase of social inclusion and the significant influence of the learning environment, with a specific focus on older people.

2. Outcome of lifelong learning programs in terms of social inclusion

Nowadays most programs of lifelong learning in the Netherlands focus on the increase of managing daily life and improvement of language skills (Huisman & Tubbing, 2005). Both objectives can be defined as aiming increase of social inclusion. According to Levitas et al. (2007), Ogg (2005), The World Bank (2007) and Van Houten (2008) social inclusion can be seen as a multidimensional process in which citizens try to cope with and control resources and services, feel included in the (local) area and take part in its activities and have or connect to social relationships. This definition suggests that social inclusion covers two dimensions, activation and internalisation on one hand and participation and connection on the other (Fortuin & Keune, 1997; Guildford, 2000; Mastergeorge, 2001; Verté et al., 2007). First, *activation* refers to the ability to cope independently in daily life in order to attain ones basic needs for example using media like internet and TV or managing one’s own finances (Fortuin & Keune, 1997; Movisie, 2010). On the other hand as a citizen, one would like to be accepted in society aiming to obtain an appropriate place in daily life (Guildford, 2000). Likewise Mastergeorge (2001) refers to this process of *internalisation* by arguing that an individual aims satisfaction by directing his or her own life in a responsible way. Secondly, besides an individual process social inclusion also refers to an interactive process between an individual and his or her surroundings. According to Guildford (2000) social inclusion can be seen as *participation*, a process in which one takes part in society’s activities for example activities like going out in the evening, visiting activities in the community or taking part in official organisations (Verté et al., 2007). Next to participation one can improve his or her social interactions with others or meet new people (Verté et al. 2007). According to Colley (1975) and Huisman et al. (2003) this is a process of *connection* referring to for example getting a membership, being active in nature and sports or preventing loneliness.

3. The learning environment of lifelong learning programs

These four processes of social inclusion can be influenced after joining a learning process. More concrete Serrano-García and Bond (1994) and McClusky (1970) argue that adult education aims a decrease of marginalisation and increase of empowerment of citizens in modern European society. Likewise Jarvis and Griffin (2003) point out that a learning process has to focus on enhancement of the quality of life. In other words it refers to using new learned knowledge, skills and attitude in daily life, which is often described as a “transfer of training effect”. These training effects could be influenced by the learning environment: i.e. (1) trainee characteristics, (2) transfer design features and (3) the participants’ environment.

3.1. Trainee characteristics

Verté et al. (2011) conducted a study among circa 70.000 older people in order to define their daily needs aiming optimal social inclusion in daily society. Due to the diverse group of respondents several background characteristics can influence increase or decrease of social inclusion. More concrete Verté et al. (2011) point out that age, gender, level of schooling, marital status, number of children, motivation, prior diplomas and courses can influence the rate of social inclusion. Additionally, Mezirow (1997) and Knowles (1975) argue that self-directedness in learning can

influence the outcome of a learning process. More recent research of Raemdonck (2006) demonstrates that the way in which a learner influences his or her own learning process determines the outcome of learning. Her study shows that the learning-process of low-skilled employees influences the learning outcome and therefore can be seen as an important background-variable or trainee characteristic.

3.2. *Transfer design*

Nijman (2004) stresses the importance of the transfer climate, learning contents- and activities and supervisory support. Firstly the transfer-climate consists of “direct surroundings” (referring to the environment of the learner) and “transfer possibilities” (referring to the possibilities to use the learned knowledge, skills or attitude in daily life). Contrary to the work environment of Nijman (2004) the direct surroundings in this study refer to the daily life-circumstances of the learner. Besides this, the learning contents and -activities refer to the principles of the constructivist learning theories for example “sharing ideas with others” and “making meaning by addressing real-life examples during the instructional unit” (Tenenbaum et al., 2001). Finally, supervisory support in this study (on the contrary of the study of Nijman (2004)) refers to the role of the teacher who stimulates the learners in using learned competencies and support them in coping with resistance (Pratt, 1999).

3.3. *Environment of the participants*

Although the environment of the participants has often been conceived as the working environment (Nijman, 2004) our study addresses the life-circumstances due to the fact that we investigate lifelong learning programs aiming an increase of social inclusion, with a specific focus on older people. Life-circumstances can refer to family-life, the raising of children, care and how one deals with work (Andrews & Withey, 1974). Besides this McGivney (1992) underlines the importance of describing barriers in daily life-circumstances, like especially for older people mobility-problems. These barriers can block transfer of training.

4. **Research questions**

This study would like to explore if vulnerable adults and especially older people experience a better social inclusion after joining adult education. And if so, which elements of the learning environment influence increase of social inclusion among these learners. Therefore two research questions can be defined, to mention:

1. *“What is the specific outcome in terms of social inclusion among vulnerable adults and especially older people after joining lifelong learning programs?”*
2. *“What is the possible influence of the different elements of the learning-environment on increase of social inclusion among vulnerable adults?”*

5. **Method**

A complete description of the data collection method has been described extensively elsewhere (Lupi et al., 2011). Briefly, for this study 995 learners joining lifelong learning programs in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Romania, Greece, Denmark and Germany filled in a questionnaire based on the SIT-instrument (Social Inclusion after Transfer) of De Greef et al. (2010). In order to answer research question 1 descriptives of change-variables (scores on post-test minus scores on pre-test) of each variable of social inclusion have been conducted. Furthermore research question 2 has been answered by binary probit modelling (Lupi et al., 2011).

6. **Results**

According to table 1 we can conclude that besides young adults and adults a significant part of the group of older learners experience an increase in social inclusion varying from 21.4% (financial skills) until 54.7% (getting a

membership). The percentages between older people and the other categories of age are almost the same except for three social inclusion variables. It seems to be clear that older people experience more increase on “digital skills” and “international language skills” and less increase on “getting a membership” and the subscale “participation and connection”.

The results of the probit modeling show that “transfer possibilities” influences both increase on subscales “activation and internalisation” and “participation and connection”. Besides this “teacher support” influences increase on the subscale “activation and internalisation” and “learning contents and -activities” and “self-directedness in learning” influence the increase on the subscale “participation and connection”.

Table 1. Percentage of participants experiencing increase of social inclusion per category of age

Category of age in years →	Total	0-40 years	41-60 years	61-100 years
Variables of social inclusion ↓				
Activation & Internalisation	46.8	47.0	48.4	43.7
1.National language skills	34.7	36.4	33.7	31.3
2.Digital skills	42.4	31.7	46.5	58.5
3.International language skills	38.7	33.2	40.3	46.5
4.Assertiveness	40.2	42.5	38.1	37.7
5.Labour and Upbringing skills	28.2	28.9	28.5	24.0
6.Voluntary work and neighbourhood skills	34.1	37.3	28.4	35.4
7.Contact skills	34.9	35.9	34.6	32.3
8.Financial skills	21.4	23.6	17.9	21.0
Participation & Connection	48.0	52.7	49.1	37.3
9.Meeting and attempting	31.3	33.1	31.5	26.5
10. Meeting intimate contacts	30.0	30.0	30.9	28.8
11.Attempting in associations neighbourhood	39.3	40.4	36.7	40.7
12.Being active in nature and sports	31.0	34.5	28.2	27.9
13.Involving into arts and culture	30.7	30.3	30.6	30.6
14.Getting a membership	54.7	58.1	56.4	45.5
15.Preventing loneliness	35.8	39.2	29.0	36.6

7. Discussion

This study explored the outcome after joining programs of lifelong learning among vulnerable adults and especially older people. The research results show that a number of older people experience an increase of social inclusion after joining lifelong learning programs varying from 21.0% (financial skills) until 58.5% (digital skills). The percentage of learners experiencing increase differs for several variables of social inclusion between (young) adults and older people. Therefore we can conclude that older people learn some different aspects of social inclusion than other learners in order to optimise their daily life. During this learning process for most of the social inclusion variables transfer possibilities are most important in order to influence the increase of social inclusion. Based on these results and the results of the Belgian Ageing Studies (BAS) De Donder et al. (2011) could define some important elements to optimise the learning environment of older people, to mention the most important ones for the learning environment (De Donder et al. 2011, p. 26): “recognition of transportation and mobility problems and keeping them into account (1), focusing on locality (2), delineation and specification of the target group (3), development of different strategies for particular groups (4), involvement of older people in several phases (5), working bottom-up and creating a sense of co-ownership (6) and making personal contact (7)”.

Thus modification of the learning model for older people can optimise the outcome. Nowadays the consortium of the European project SMARTE (Strengths for Mastering Ageing by Realising Tools in Europe) uses these research results in order to construct a variety of different innovative learning-areas, in which older people can improve their

skills for an ongoing active participation in European society. By focussing on the realisation of transfer possibilities and taking the recommendations of the Belgian Ageing Studies into account the consortium takes an attempt to develop a new senior learning model for lifelong learning programs in order to aim durable participation of older people in the European society.

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